

# Thriving

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## 13 Common Sayings to Avoid

*Richard Curwin*

**W**hen I was a new teacher in middle school several centuries ago, I occasionally said things to students that I later regretted. In the last few years, I have witnessed or heard teachers say additional regretful things to students. Recently, I asked students in my graduate courses (all practicing teachers) if they ever told their students anything they regret. After hearing these regrets and talking with children about what teachers said that bothered them, I compiled a list of things that never should be said.

I've narrowed my list to 13 representative items. Some of these are related to control issues, others to motivation, and still more to management. All reflect frustration and/or anger. When school starts again in the fall, let's wipe these sayings out of our vernacular.

### **1. "You have potential but don't use it."**

Students feel insulted when they hear this, and while some accept it as a challenge to do better, more lose their motivation to care. Instead, say in a caring way, "How can I help you reach your full potential?"

### **2. "I'm disappointed in you."**

Of course we occasionally are disappointed in things that our students do. In addition, the result of openly expressing that disappointment depends as much on the way we say it as the words we use. But students have told me that they hate hearing a teacher say this. The problem with this saying is that it looks to the past. A more helpful approach looks to the future. The alternative might be more like, "What do you think you can do to make a more helpful decision the next time you are in a similar situation?"

### **3. "What did you say?"**

This is the challenge that some teachers might throw down when walking away from a student after a private discussion about behavior and hearing that student whisper something. "What did you say?" is just bait for escalation. Do you really want to know what was whispered? It's better to ignore that unheard comeback and move on. You don't always need to have the last word.

### **4. "If I do that for you, I'll have to do it for everyone."**

In our book, *Discipline With Dignity*, Allen Mendler and I make a strong case for the policy that fair is not equal. You can't treat everyone the same and be fair. Each student needs what helps him or her, and every student is different. Further, no one wants to think of him- or herself as one of a herd. It's better to say, "I'm not sure if I can do that, but I'll do my best to meet your needs in one way or another."

### **5. "It's against the rules."**

Rules are about behavior. Often there are many behaviors from which people can choose in order to solve a problem. Some may be within the rules. Try saying this instead: "Let me see if there's a way to meet your need within the rules."

### **6. "Your brother/sister was better than you."**

Never compare siblings or anyone else in a positive or negative way about anything. Comparisons can only lead to trouble regardless of which side of the coin the student is. My grandchildren always ask me, "Who's your favorite?" What if I actually gave an answer?

### **7. "I like the way Toby is sitting."**

This is a manipulation to get the class to sit down. Saying this teaches children that manipulation works. It's better to be direct and tell the truth by saying, "Class, please sit down." In addition, any student who is never publicly singled out for something positive will resent you. While I used to employ this technique myself, I think the downside far outweighs the good, even if it works.

### **8. "You'll never amount to anything."**

Not only is this an insult, but it is usually wrong. When I was young, I was told that I would never be a teacher. How many great people have been told this? How many of you have heard it?

### 9. "Who do you think you are?"

Do you really need to know who they think they are? This question is meant to say, "You are not as important as I am!" This communicates sheer arrogance and is asking for a power struggle.

### 10. "Don't you ever stop talking?"

This is a snide way of asking the student to stop talking. Never start with a question like, "Don't you ever \_\_\_\_\_?" You can fill in any behavior or attitude: "listen," "do your homework," "try," "care about your work." Avoid the sarcasm and directly say what you are feeling.

### 11. "I'm busy now."

Don't dismiss a student this abruptly if they need you in some way. Show that you care by saying, "I'm very busy now, but you are very important to me. Unless this is an emergency, let's find a better time to talk. I really want to hear what's on your mind."

### 12. "The whole class will miss \_\_\_\_\_ unless someone admits to \_\_\_\_\_."

Collective punishment is never appropriate. There are many reasons why we should avoid collective punishment, but the most important is that if we want students to learn how to take responsibility for their behavior, they need somewhat predictable outcomes for their choices. When they're punished for something they didn't do, they see the world as an unpredictable place where consequences have nothing to do with choices. This is not what we want children to learn.

### 13. "What is wrong with you?"

This question implies a defect or an imperfect student. We are all imperfect, so the question is really only intended as an insult. What do you expect the student to answer? "I'm the son of abusive parents who hate me?" I have heard many professionals say that everyone is perfect at being who they are. A better approach is to say something like, "I see you have a problem. Let's work together to find a solution."

If a teacher loses his temper or gets frustrated and says one of these things once or even twice during the year, it's understandable. For most students, a rare mishap makes no difference with a teacher who they respect and like. But if trust hasn't been established, students are less forgiving when they feel insulted or wronged. On the other hand, we can say something nice or neutral that might be heard by a student as an insult. These instances are hard to avoid. What we can avoid is saying things that we know in advance are hurtful.

This article was first posted on *Edutopia*, August 11, 2015, and is reprinted with permission from the author.

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